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How Smart Is American Intelligence?

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Just how smart is American intelligence? Sixty of the nation's top security experts gathered not long ago in Washington to find out.

The conference included former CIA and military officials, staffers on congressional intelligence committees, academics, journalists, and leaders from America's strategic think tanks.

The conference transcripts are fascinating but not comforting reading.



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Many think the CIA exists to warn us of future Pearl Harbors. But this conference underscored the importance of non-military intelligence as well.

Would our president, for example, have advance warning of a coup d'etat in unstable Saudi Arabia? Well, the intelligence report from Iran in September 1978 concluded that the shah "is expected to remain actively in power over the next 10 years" (off by only nine years, eight months).

Would the United States be able to detect a major Soviet technological breakthrough? Professor Michael Handel of Harvard warns that "the intelligence community has never attracted the first rank of scientists (with notable exceptions during war)."

Is American intelligence prepared to forewarn of international political terrorism? Short answer: no.

Recruiting intelligence analysts is another problem. The CIA is still not popular on college campuses. But requiring certain degrees, cautions former CIA director William Colby, "could bar from the corps of analysts the mudcaked activist who has tramped the back jungle" and learned more than any college classroom could provide.

The CIA also lacks linguists. This creates a backlog in processing intelligence. Complains Brookings' Richard Betts: "You can't get people who know Arabic to sit and listen to tapes all day. There aren't that many of them, and the few there are would rather do other things."

One participant complained that our young CIA analysts fail to comprehend the Russians. Apprentice them for six months in a "Detroit homicide squad, the night court in Los Angeles, or even a union picket line," he suggests. A university simply fails to commu-

cate "the visceral feel for the reality that periodically explodes out of the Tartar Steppes."

The classic trap of intelligence is that of wishful thinking. It's well-known that Stalin refused even to hear the overwhelming evidence of his secret services that Hitler was about to turn on Russia in Barbarossa. Don't laugh. American presidents made it clear to the CIA that unpleasant news about the shah was unwelcome; it poisoned the political climate for arms sales to Iran.

Wishful intelligence now assumes that the Soviet Union is the mirror image of the United States. Our defense doctrine is labeled MAD (nuclear war involves Mutually Assured Destruction). We have assumed, despite massive expenditures on MIRVed missiles and hardened fallout shelters, that the Soviets were sane enough to think likewise.

Was this a major intelligence blunder? As Senator Malcolm Wallop (R-Wyo.) notes:

"While the Soviets were beginning the biggest military buildup in history, the NIEs [National Intelligence Estimates] judged that they would not try to build as many missiles as we had. When the Soviets approached our number, the NIEs said they were unlikely

exceeded it substantially, the NIEs said they would not try for decisive superiority—the capability to fight and win a nuclear war. Only very recently have the NIEs admitted the possibility as an 'elusive question.' Now the NIEs say the Soviets may be trying for such a capability but they cannot be sure it will work."

During the 1970s, some in Congress thought intelligence activity vaguely immoral. But where our national security is concerned, the greatest immorality is inadequacy.

The president of the National Strategy Information Center, Frank Barnett, fears that Americans have grown too comfortable to sense "how frequently brute force, psywar, treachery, and violence determine human events in the arena outside the Anglo-Saxon playing fields." Pleasant thinking—on the part of those who gather and those who read intelligence—has brought us into the 1980s, encumbered by the reality of overwhelming Soviet power.

"My opinion of the Russians has changed more drastically in the last week than even the previous two and a half years before that," said Jimmy Carter, post-Afghanistan.

Somehow, someone is not getting the message. Let us hope that statement reflects an outlook unique to this particular president, not the stream of intelligence that passed before his eyes.